

The ninth candle

A Jewish story

Key ideas: Hanukkah, light, miracles, celebrations, traditions

Rachel and Tom were in the same class at school and were good friends. They had been studying the festival of Hanukkah in school, and Rachel could see that Tom was having problems understanding what it was all about. It was December, and Rachel's family were preparing for the celebrations, so she asked Tom round to help with the jobs. They found the special candlestick with eight branches and polished it until it shone.

'But I still don't understand why there are nine candles,' Tom sighed. 'Ah' replied Rachel, with a mischievous grin, 'that's a secret. You must work it out for yourself, I'm afraid,' she added. 'It's very simple, if you're Jewish.' 'Yes well, I'm not Jewish, am I?' Tom snapped. 'All I know is, when I'm working hard at school, you're off having a nice time and getting presents and things for Han..Hani...'

'Hanukkah,' Rachel corrected him. 'It's the way we remember a miracle that happened thousands of years ago.' 'What's a miracle again?' said Tom. Now it was Rachel's turn to sigh. 'I told you, it's when something really amazing happens and nobody can explain it. 'Go on then, said Tom.

'Well back in the olden days most Jewish people lived in Judea. That's the country we now call Israel. But the King, Antiochus, wasn't Jewish, and he ordered us to stop worshipping God and to worship his gods instead. He said if we didn't he'd burn down our houses and kill us. Then a brave priest called Matthias stood up to the king and refused to worship his gods. Maccabee, the priest's son, gathered together an army of Jews to fight Antiochus. And although there weren't very many of them, they learned how to fight in the dark, so they could surprise Antiochus' soldiers by night.'

'So who won?' Tom wanted to know.' 'The Jews did of course!' answered Rachel, 'but it was a hard fight and it took three years. Once they'd won back their country from the foreign king, they set about rebuilding their holy temple in Jerusalem. And that's when the miracle happened.'

'Don't stop now! urged Tom. 'I want to hear the rest of the story!' Rachel smiled sweetly. 'Really? Alright then. The Jews had a special lamp called a menorah for the temple which they kept burning day and night. But try as they might they could only find enough oil to fill the menorah for a single day. Then the most incredible thing happened. The oil just kept on burning day after day – until it had burned for eight days and eight nights until oil could be brought to fill it again. And that was the miracle.'

'We celebrate this miracle every year for eight days and nights at Hanukkah. And that is why it is the Jewish festival of light. We play games together and we eat special foods like sweets and cakes. And we light a kind of candlestick with nine candles, called a "Hanukkiah". 'Yes I KNOW! Complained a frustrated Tom, 'But why does it have NINE candles when the oil only burned for EIGHT days?'

'Ah!' replied Rachel mysteriously. Tom almost shouted at her, 'Tell me!' As Rachel walked away she called over her shoulder at him; 'The ninth candle is the one you use to light the other eight!'